

How We Used the Aftermath of a Fight to Repair Our Relationship

By Kyle Benson

My partner and I got into a huge fight about our cat's litter box. I know this sounds ridiculous, but hear me out.

We both said things we didn't mean. She told me I didn't care about our cat and that my work mattered more to me than the well-being of Miss Remy. I told her she was irresponsible for sleeping in and leaving the litter box to me as she bolted out the door late for work.



How could we get mad at that face, right?

As John Gottman's research has shown, it's not *what* you fight about that matters, but how you repair when your inevitable differences in personality, perspective, and needs collide.

If you don't process these conflicts, then you may both find yourselves feeling disrespected, lonely, and neglected—drifting away from each other like two ships without anchors.

According to Julie Gottman, when couples come to therapy, partners “often sit side-by-side like enemy ships, war-torn but still afloat. Many have fired rounds at each other, and there’s been damage done.”

Often these wounds are left open. They’re so painful that we tell ourselves “never again will I let my partner see that vulnerable side of me.”

The problem is no matter how much we want to suppress our hurt feelings, they don’t go away. The avoidant strategy of “just get over it and move on” only works temporarily, at best. In fact, this approach to conflict is often a learned response from the internalized belief that no one will ever be there for you when you need them, so it’s better not to even attempt to discuss things.

Unfortunately, regrettable incidents that haven’t been addressed melt away the positive connection in a relationship, creating a chasm between partners.

The mask of unresolved pain

As humans, we struggle to let go of a memory until we’ve emotionally digested it. It’s likely this has led to our survival as a species. Our brains remain hypervigilant to the things we deem unsafe.

According to neuroscientist Evan Gordon, our brain is constantly scanning the world around us, asking: Is it safe or dangerous right now?

With significant unresolved problems, it becomes nearly impossible to make the safe emotional connection necessary for a secure relationship.

As a result, we often perpetuate insecurity in our relationship, even over things like a cat’s litter box, because we don’t feel safe enough to express our deeper, more vulnerable emotions like sadness, hurt, loneliness, fear of abandonment or rejection, and shame of not being “enough” or being “too much.”

Instead, our partners see a different side of us. They see our anger, jealousy, resentment, and frustration. We hide our softer emotions behind a mask of the harder, more reactive emotions as our poor communication

habits continue to wreak havoc on our emotional connection, making it harder for our partner to hear our longing for love and connection. The good news is learning how to process regrettable incidents makes it easier for us to reconnect and ultimately grow.

In the Love Lab, John Gottman noticed that couples who were able to process past hurtful events were able to build a relationship as strong as steel. Discussing the regrettable incident became the fire through which they forged a stronger bond.

Here's how to do this for your relationship.

The Aftermath of a Fight

If this is your first time using The Aftermath of a Fight exercise, start by asking yourself the following questions.

1. Am I ready to process this regrettable incident? According to Julie Gottman, "processing" means that you can talk about the incident without getting back into it again.
2. Have my emotions been calm today and can I have a calm conversation about this incident? It's helpful to think of watching this incident on your TV. This can help create some emotional distance necessary to discuss what occurred.
3. Am I willing to seek to understand my partner's experience of the event and validate that each of our emotional realities are legitimate? Hint: Don't focus on "the facts."
4. Am I willing to speak from my experience without trying to persuade my partner?
5. Am I willing to ATTUNE to my partner's feelings and what the event meant to them?
6. Are we in a distraction free space where we can be fully present with each other?

When my partner and I are both able to respond yes to all of these questions, we begin processing our regrettable incident using the five steps outlined below.

Step 1: Express How You Felt During This Event

The goal of this step is to only list the feelings you felt during this event. Do not share why you felt this way and do not comment on your partner's feelings.

My partner went first and explained that when we fought over the litter box, she felt angry, unloved, not cared about, and overwhelmed. I shared that I felt misunderstood, unappreciated, and taken for granted, and that these feelings had made me stubborn.

Step 2: Share Your Realities and Validate Each Other

The next step is to choose a speaker and a listener. As the speaker, your goal is to share your own reality of what occurred during the regrettable event. Focus on using "I" statements and what you noticed ("I heard...", not "you told me") and what you needed during the event. Avoid criticizing your partner.

As the listener, focus on seeking to understand your partner's unique experience. Then summarize what you heard them say, not what you believed they meant, and validate their experience by saying things like, "When I see things from your perspective, it makes perfect sense why you were so upset."

After you validate your partner's experience, ask them, "Did I get it right?" If not, ask them to share what you're not understanding and continue to validate until they say yes. As Julie Gottman reminds us, "Validation doesn't mean you agree, but that you can understand even a part of your partner's experience of the incident."

It's also important to ask, "Is there more to this for you?" This may uncover deeper meanings or other aspects of this event that they have yet to discuss. Remember, the goal is to make your partner feel completely understood. This makes them feel safe and loved, which makes it easier for you to repair and build a stronger connection.

Then switch roles. Do not move onto the next step until both partners feel understood.

My partner started as the speaker and shared that she felt overwhelmed because her cat that had been in her family for 13 years was dying, and she was probably going to have to put her down soon. She also felt unloved and angry because, from her perspective, I had refused to clean the litter box and instead chose finishing work over caring for our cat.

Even though I really wanted to defend myself as my partner was sharing, I bit my tongue and focused on truly understanding her experience. I reflected what I heard back to her: "So you felt overwhelmed because you are facing the tough decision of when to put your beloved cat down after so many years. I also hear that you noticed I was working and telling you I did not have time to clean the litter box, which caused you to feel like I didn't care about Remy. Is that correct?"

After my partner agreed that I had it right, I asked her, "Is there more to this?" After a few more exchanges, she felt like I completely understood her experience and we switched roles.

I shared how I felt unappreciated because I had done many other things to help with Remy, including taking her to the vet while my partner was at work. I also felt my "working hours" were taken for granted since my office is in our home and that I was expected to drop everything I was doing to do what my partner wanted in that moment. I also mentioned to my partner that she probably was unaware that I had 15-minutes to finish two important emails before I needed to leave for my personal therapy session across town.

My partner validated my experience and I felt she completely understood me.

Step 3: Disclose Your Triggers

Beneath difficult conflicts, even silly things like a litter box, are emotional triggers. These sensitivities stem from personal histories and often make minor events quickly transform into major blowups.

During this step, take turns as a speaker and listener and disclose what triggered a big reaction in you. Add any previous experiences of when you

felt similar in the past, including during your early history or childhood, and share that with your partner, so your partner can understand this sensitivity. My partner shared that she felt helpless and alone, something she knows all too well. Ever since high school, she's been one of the primary caregivers for her father who has severe Parkinson's disease. With her mother and brother on the other side of the country, she has felt alone and abandoned in the moments when she needed her family most. She shared that the idea of losing our cat and not caring for her well during these last days of her life stirred up these deeper feelings.

I validated her triggers, and since I've sat next to my partner while she has cried over this very thing many times before, I understood what she meant and shared that understanding with her.

I then shared my triggers, which include a sensitivity to feeling disrespected or like my needs don't matter. As an anxious lover, I've often neglected my personal needs over the needs of others. Because of this, I have often ended up feeling inadequate and like my needs don't matter. Over time, this has made me wary. When my partner requested that I stop working and instantly take care of our cat, I felt like my needs didn't matter.

My partner asked more questions about this sensitivity and learned more about my history of not asking for what I need and the difficulty I've had in asserting my boundaries. She came to understand that this is something I've spent years of therapy working on.

Step 4: Take Ownership for Your Role

If we lived in a perfect world, it's unlikely this regrettable incident would have even occurred because we would have already felt emotionally calm, connected to each other, and fully accepted and loved.

Unfortunately, we get stressed and feel unappreciated by our partner, which makes it easier for us to have regrettable incidents. It's helpful to acknowledge the things that set us up for miscommunicating with each other, take ownership, and apologize.

This step is about taking responsibility for your part in the conflict. My partner shared that she had been stressed, irritable, and overly sensitive

lately. She then mentioned that she regretted how critical she was of me and how she spoke to me. She then apologized for overreacting and attacking me.

I shared that I had been turning away more and had been very preoccupied with work and running on empty lately. I regretted responding defensively and accusing my partner of being lazy. I then apologized for being defensive and attacking my partner's character.

We both accepted each other's apologies and acknowledged that things got out of hand. If the apologies are not accepted when you are doing this with your partner, each of you should say what you still need.

Step 5: Preventative Planning

Have an open conversation with your partner and share one thing you could do to make discussing this issue better next time, and then share one thing you think your partner can do to make it better.

Remember to make this a positive and actionable request, such as "I need to know more about what has been stressing you out lately," not "I need you to stop being a jerk." It's important to ask, "What do we need to do to put this incident to rest so we can move on?"

Focus on what you can agree on together.

My partner and I agreed to get back in the habit of our stress reducing conversation, so we can continue to check in with each other about our cat and the stress we've both been holding inside recently.

Conflict as an opportunity for intimacy

Every conflict, even the regrettable ones, offers an opportunity for a deeper understanding of each other. While this fight about a litter box

seems silly, it highlights how often little things can become big things because of the underlying feelings and meanings beneath.

The problem with these incidents is that we do not repair or take proactive steps to prevent them from escalating in the future. Going through The Aftermath of a Fight Guide has been something my partner and I have had to do time and time again.

Even Julie Gottman admits that she and her husband, John Gottman, have “been married for nearly 30 years with too many [regrettable incidents] to count!”

Constructing a great relationship is hard work and requires growth from both partners. At times this will mean processing difficult events and tolerating discomfort. The good news is these regrettable incidents, when processed, can be used to build a stronger and more meaningful relationship.

This article can be found online at:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/how-we-used-the-aftermath-of-a-fight-to-repair-our-relationship/>